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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 005282

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [ECON](#) [SNAR](#) [VE](#) [CO](#) [FARC](#)

SUBJECT: PROGRESS IN CESAR DEPARTMENT

REF: BOGOTA 112

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood; Reasons: 1.4 B & D

¶11. (C) Summary: Officials and residents of Cesar Department praise President Uribe's security improvements. The cities and highways of Cesar's central valley are far safer than they were a year ago, and the economy has grown slightly. However, guerrillas and paramilitaries find refuge in the highlands, and contraband and outlaws still cross an open border with Venezuela. The indigenous occasionally accommodate the FARC in the highlands. End Summary.

Background

¶12. (U) Cesar and its capital, Valledupar, occupy a valley in the North of Colombia. Cattle and coal mining dominate the economy. Paramilitaries move contraband fuel from Venezuela through the Department.

¶13. (C) Cesar has suffered in recent decades from depredations of guerrillas, paramilitaries, and common criminals driving people into Valledupar and other cities. Internally displaced persons comprise roughly ten percent of Valledupar's population of 400,000.

The Valley is Secure, but not the Highlands

¶14. (C) President Uribe's Democratic Security Policy has brought the lowlands of Cesar under governmental control and opened the corridor to neighboring departments. Highways are now relatively free from illegal roadblocks and kidnappings. The FARC's 19th Front operates from base camps in the Sierra Nevada range. The 41st Front can regroup and resupply in Venezuela, according to military and intelligence officials. The Army aims to cut the FARC's and paramilitaries' access to the valley by attacking them in the foothills. Guerrillas and paramilitaries are feeling the pinch of these military operations, but are still active though at reduced levels.

Crime Down; Legitimate Activity Up

¶15. (C) Crime in Cesar decreased significantly in the first four months of 2004 in comparison with the same period in 2003. Kidnappings and murders dropped by 73 and 17 percent, respectively. Marijuana and cocaine seizures more than doubled during the same period. The arrest rate for all crimes rose by 19 percent. The number of guerrillas captured rose by 1000 percent, and paramilitaries by 1400 percent. National Police (CNP) Commander Orlando Pineda pointed to the significant rise in paramilitary arrests as evidence that the police do not favor them.

¶16. (C) Under "Plan Coverage," which assigns police to formerly unprotected zones, the CNP has deployed small detachments of officers to 25 small towns. Police encourage crime reporting through community organizations. The CNP's Pineda noted that rapid response to crime reports was key to winning citizen cooperation. He said that most of the police were from Cesar. Department of Administrative Security (DAS; FBI equivalent) officers agreed that the police program was working well in the small towns.

¶17. (C) Cattlemen are less subject to kidnapping and extortion, and landowners can once again visit their properties. With GOC support, some 110,000 new acres of cotton will be planted (Cesar was once a major cotton producer). Coal extraction at U.S.-owned Drummond Industries is at record levels. The Army established a training center near Drummond, and units protect the company's rail line from attacks by the FARC and ELN. Drummond VP Alfredo Araujo said there had been no attacks for a year.

Uribe Gets the Credit

¶18. (C) Given improvements to security and the economy, support for Uribe's Democratic Security Policy is near unanimous in Cesar. Local opinion makers said that these

improvements have consolidated support for Uribe. That said, Congressmen Alfredo Cuello and Jorge Ramirez both opined that the bill to permit reelection would have a tough time in the House of Representatives.

Indigenous Colombians Remain Vulnerable

19. (C) Valledupar Mayor Ciro Pupo described the region's indigenous population as abandoned. Col. Juan Carlos Figueroa, Commander of the Valledupar Army battalion, said that the lack of state presence in the highlands of Santa Marta had led the indigenous groups to develop long-standing accommodations with the FARC. Col. Figueroa said that paramilitaries murdered 14 indigenous last year, but the GOC Vice President's Office put the figure at 43 for the first nine months of 2003. The VP's report also noted recruitment of young people as guides for armed groups fighting in the highlands.

Governor's Vision

10. (C) Governor Hernando Molina Araujo is seeking to encourage the GOC's Solidarity Network to provide assistance to small businesses and farms, including for coffee and cocoa, to promote resettling the highlands as they become more secure. The goal is to integrate poor and marginal populations into the local economy and civil society. He said that resentment toward the failings of the state was a major factor in leading disaffected youth to join the illegal armed groups. Col. Figueroa cited the large landholdings in the region as a factor in negative attitudes toward the state. A handful of politically powerful families -- notably the Araujo clan, from which the governor hails -- control these landholdings (reftel).

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